

MAITRI

A Home and Hospice for People with AIDS

by Kenneth L. Ireland

Dear Friends,

My name is Ken Ireland, and I am the Director of the MAITRI AIDS Hospice. When *The Ten Directions* invited us to write this letter describing ourselves and what we do, my tendency was to begin the usual litany of number of people served, the high incidence of AIDS in our community, the lack of resources, the usual stuff that I write down when asking for money. But when I got up this morning and came down to the office, I decided to try to describe to a group of practitioners what it was like to live in a Temple where half the residents were people dying from an incurable disease.

It is Sunday morning, during the August interim. A few of the regulars are sitting. The attendants Lloyd and Jim are here. People are looking in on Randall, who is very close to death. I walk past Joe who is napping on the couch in the 'van Gogh' room, named for the big cheap poster of haystacks we found when we took over the building that is now the hospice.

I glance into Randy's room. He seems very comfortable and quiet. His breathing is very slow and very shallow, not yet the unnerving gasping signaling that the end is very close. The whole house, our whole family, is now on death watch.

Randy's Mom is here as she has been so frequently during the past 10 months that Randy's lived with us. She seems to be holding up quite well. She told me that although she is quite prepared for Randy's death, even grateful that his suffering will soon be over, she knows that mothers are never prepared to lose their sons. I like her very much. She's a solid, no-nonsense woman, and she feels free enough around us, a group of strangers, not to hide her feelings. Things can get pretty close in our little Temple. We hear fights, and we cannot avoid the deep feelings of frustration and pain when lives and dreams end. Randy's Mom told his doctor to begin the sublingual morphine. It seems that he no longer feels pain, but that edge, that determination to struggle to live, is gone. He's not with us at the table, trying to eat, trying to trick the nausea. I wonder if he's waiting for death.

I remember when Randy first arrived in October of last year. Ann, the nurse from Visiting Nurses and Hospice of San Francisco, told me that she'd be surprised if he lived for more than a couple of months. He could no longer manage at home by himself and was deteriorating rapidly.

Together we got through a couple of half-hearted suicide attempts. My back got through the two months of carrying him downstairs. (We've resisted putting in a lift; it just seems to be one of those fixtures that signal some kind of institutional nursing home environment that we try to avoid. It also means money which there is precious little of, and there are reports that they do not work reliably.) Today he'd be no problem to carry downstairs. He probably

Zen practitioner Ken Ireland is the Director of MAITRI AIDS Hospice.

SOCIAL ACTION

weighs no more than 80 pounds.

I remember my fear that the bond formed by daily body-to-body contact would make his death that much more painful for me. But sharing our lives for nearly a year will not make his death easy for any of us.

Issan Dorsey, Roshi once lectured about dying at home. He said that although his great grandmother had died surrounded by her family, his grandmother had died in a nursing home. It was difficult to see much positive about the AIDS epidemic, but at least people were allowed to die at home surrounded by their friends. He envisioned MAITRI as a way for friends to take care of their friends in the last moments of life.

Baker Roshi once said to me that the training of the Zen monk was quite a bit like being a housewife. For Issan Roshi, at least that part must have been second nature. So often I had seen him make people feel at ease with such simplicity. In its simplest form, he intended that this hospice be a home.

I try to use this image of an ordinary home as a balance while I do what I see as my job. I'm supposed to coordinate all our efforts, make sure that there is enough money to pay the bills, make sure that the cable TV stays turned on, and check to see that no one ODs on pasta.

Right now, upstairs, Shunko is continuing to paint the dining room and Daiko is fixing lunch. It's hard to know exactly how many will eat, sometimes lunch is for 8, sometimes 20. Today's lunch will be mostly leftovers. George is here; he's a volunteer who knows how to do infusions and he's taking care of Randall's DHPG, a medication given intravenously to slow down blindness. Bernie, another resident with AIDS, is sitting with Randall. Our practice, I'm told, is just to take care of the next thing.

I talk to people who are dealing with this epidemic from the side of public health and government, and I feel a lot of pressure to turn MAITRI into a kind of Buddhist nursing home. We try to be extremely professional so that residents are insured the best care possible.

MAITRI is different from a strict hospice in two ways: we allow residents to take part in any kind of experimental protocol that they can get into, and we allow residents to remain with us even if they get better and get more control over their lives. Most arrived broke and with little hope for any kind of life; it's not OK to take that hope and home away simply because we feel outside pressures for more hospice beds. Dorsey Roshi wanted a home, and a home is a place that you can't get kicked out of.

After 18 months of living here and 9 months of being Director, I know less and less about what we should be doing. There is very little sense "out there" about what should be done. So we try to do the next thing, to continue our practice, to take care of the folks who are sick as best we can.

Six Buddhist monks and a handful of lay practitioners, helped by a group of professionals and volunteers, may not be able to make a large dent in serving those who need and will continue to need help in the course of HIV infection, but we intend to continue to try to be true to our practice and the intention of Dorsey Roshi.

We are truly grateful for the support that has allowed us to start and to continue MAITRI. We started with nothing and end each year with nothing, at least in terms of cash reserves, but we fully intend to continue our work.

I would like to thank *The Ten Directions* for giving me this opportunity to write this letter to the larger Sangha and to invite anyone to help in whatever way they can.

Sincerely,
Ken

MAITRI HOSPICE

It has been over two years now since the Hartford Street Zen Center began the MAITRI Hospice program for people living with AIDS. The word "maitri" is Sanskrit for "friendliness" and captures the spirit of genuine friendship that characterizes the Hospice. This is the first Buddhist AIDS hospice program in America.

When one of the sangha members, J.D. Kobezak, became too sick to remain at home, Issan Dorsey, Roshi, started MAITRI to care for him and other friends in a supportive and home-like environment. MAITRI is part of Issanji, One Mountain Zen Temple, located at 57-61 Hartford Street in the heart of San Francisco's Castro district.

The Temple and Hospice are located in two adjoining buildings that share a lush back yard overflowing with roses. There are currently fifteen residents, seven of whom have AIDS. The dedicated resident staff includes four Zen monks, one of whom is a woman, two lay practitioners, and twenty volunteers. They work closely with Visiting Nurses and Hospice of San Francisco in providing medical care. MAITRI differs from traditional hospices in that it allows more aggressive treatment of HIV infection, if that is what an individual wants.

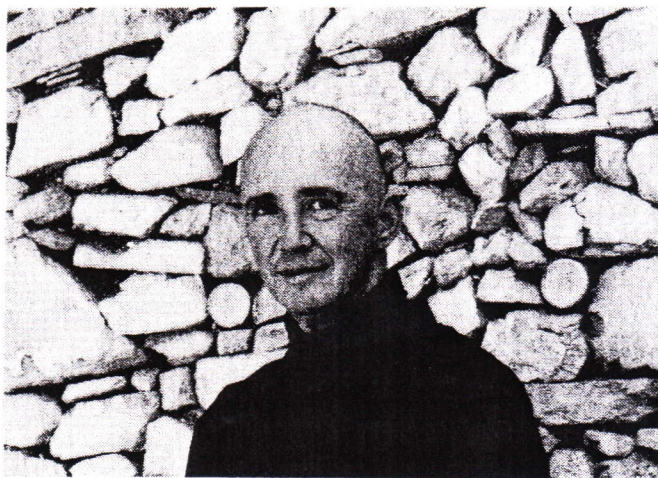
The Temple schedule is somewhat adjusted to allow the residents more time to do what has to be done to run the Hospice. There are sitting periods twice a day and two services. A practice period is scheduled for this Fall with a more demanding schedule of sitting, lectures, and classes.

The annual budget for MAITRI Hospice is in the neighborhood of \$120,000. Funds come from members, friends, and donors who support this extraordinary effort. Because of cumbersome bureaucratic regulations, the Hospice does not "qualify" for government funding. Working from where they are, extending care to friends in need, MAITRI continues its demanding work and needs your help.

Readers who would like to support MAITRI Hospice may write to them at the address below. *The Ten Directions* also encourages interested persons to view Sharon Kehoe's video "The Story of MAITRI Hospice," a beautiful 28-minute documentary which includes moving passages with the late Dorsey Roshi, members of the staff, volunteers, and residents in the program. Copies are available for \$22.50 through MAITRI.

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In Memoriam



TOMMY ISSAN DORSEY, ROSHI, 1933 - 1990

Photo by Morgan Alexander

Tommy Issan Dorsey, Roshi, Abbot of Issanji (One Mountain Temple) of the Hartford Street Zen Center and Founder of the MAITRI Hospice, died of AIDS-related lymphoma on September 6, 1990. Dorsey Roshi died at the hospice, surrounded by friends and practitioners. He was 57 years old.

When Issan climbed the Mountain Seat on November 4, 1989 to become Abbot of the Hartford Street Zen Center, not quite a year before his death, he had trod the most unusual path in Zen history to such an honor. He had been by turns a repressed young homosexual sailor; an outrageous female impersonator singer-dancer called Tommy Dee; a drug-addicted, road-weary performer; a leader of The Family, the first and largest Hippie commune; a spiritual adept; a Zen priest; a Temple Abbot; and a provider to the terminally ill and homeless.

Meeting Shunryu Suzuki, Roshi in 1968, Issan became an avid practitioner and held many important positions in Zen Center's practice locations during the next 20 years. He served as Shuso at Tassajara in 1978, and he was the Director of the San Francisco Zen Center for five years, through 1983.

Issan began meeting with a group of gay Buddhist practitioners in San Francisco's Castro district. With his encouragement, the group bought a Victorian house at 57 Hartford Street and established a meditation hall. In 1987, Issan established the MAITRI hospice for homeless people with AIDS, leasing the building adjacent to his temple.

Issan received Dharma Transmission from Richard Zen-tatsu Baker, Roshi in 1989 and was installed as Abbot of the Hartford Street Zen Center. In a poignant ceremony just five days before his death, Dorsey Roshi passed the Mountain Seat to his Dharma Heir, Steve Kijun Allen.

Donations in Dorsey Roshi's memory may be made to the MAITRI Hospice.

Excerpted from the obituary by David Tensho Schneider, who is writing a book on the life of Issan Dorsey, Roshi.